

# Montgomery ambulance fee on chopping block

By Brian Hughes  
Examiner Staff Writer

Opponents of Montgomery County's ambulance fee are anticipating a short shelf life for the new charge, saying the political backing is essentially in place to spike the measure.

But the fee's demise is hardly clearcut, as campaign rhetoric is set to clash with budget realities in coming months.

Barring a major upset in November's election, state Del. Craig Rice and community activist Hans Riemer, who won two County Council seats in the Democratic primary — and slammed the fee on the campaign trail — would ensure a veto-proof majority on the council to repeal the charge, some say.

"Six candidates are now on record against the fee," said Councilman Phil Andrews, D-Gaithersburg/Rockville, who has vowed to introduce legislation to squash the charge if it is not overturned by voters. "The votes would be there to repeal the fee."

The issue moved to the political forefront when the county's Board of Elections denied a petition by volunteer firefighters to place the measure on the ballot in November, saying the majority of 50,000 signatures did not meet new fraud-prevention standards.

In turn, the volunteer firefighters sued the board—the lawsuit will be heard in county circuit court Tuesday — equating the ruling to disenfranchisement. A final ruling is expected by the end of the month, the deadline for November ballot initiatives.

After Rice and Riemer prevailed in the primary, volunteer firefighters hailed the candidates' criticism of the ambulance fee.

However, when asked if he would back a bill repealing the ambulance fee, Riemer said, "I can't speak to legislation I haven't seen. I'm not going to get ahead of myself."

And while Rice said he would support Andrews' bill, he added that budget cuts would need to come from sources other than public safety departments to offset the lost revenue.

Under the law, insurance companies are charged between \$300 and \$800 per ambulance ride. Uninsured county residents aren't subject to the charge and non-county residents pay any cost not covered by insurance.

According to county estimates, the fee would raise \$12.5 million this fiscal year—which supporters predict will halt council action to stop the fee.

“When candidates come face to face with the budget situation, I don’t believe anyone will repeal this law,” said Patrick Lacefield, spokesman for County Executive Ike Legget.

“It would be really irresponsible [to repeal],” added Councilman Marc Elrich D-at large. “They would be forcing millions of dollars in midyear cuts and that much more hardship.”

bhughes@washingtonexaminer.com